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Corps provides safe passage for 22.3 million juvenile salmon and steelhead on the Snake and Columbia rivers

Walla Walla, Wash. -- In a near record drought year, the Walla Walla District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers juvenile fish transportation program provided safe downstream passage for more than 22.3 million juvenile salmon and steelhead by barge and truck to a release site below Bonneville Dam, the last dam between migrating juvenile fish and the ocean.

"This year the in-river survival rates were low and that made the transport program benefits high," said Dave Hurson, fish passage coordinator at Walla Walla District.

"The National Marine Fisheries Biological Opinion recognizes and requires the Corps to maximize the transport program in a low flow year since in-river survival is so low," said Hurson. There were only four hours of spill this year at Ice Harbor Dam on the Snake River for fish passage because river flows were low.

National Marine Fisheries Service estimated that about 80 percent of Snake River salmon and steelhead were transported this year. The Corps uses the transportation program to get salmon safely past the dams, avoid predators in the reservoirs and speed up the trip of the salmon downriver. The survival rate of fish transported averages 98 percent, versus an estimated in-river survival rate this year of 23 percent. Survival rates of in-river passage recent years varied from 30 to 70 percent, depending upon water conditions.

"The transportation program is especially useful in low water years such as this," said Hurson. The transport program begins in April and ends in October on the Snake River. On the Columbia River it normally begins in mid-June and goes through December. This year, it began on May 1 to provide safe passage for Columbia River fish.

According to Hurson, the latest research shows that about twice as many transported fish return than fish that travel in-river to below Bonneville Dam.

Record numbers of adults returned this year to the Columbia and Snake rivers. "It's an indication that we are getting better ocean survival and some of it could be attributed to the improvements being made by the Corps and the region to the river system," said Hurson.

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